

Appreciating Poetry

By Wisam Mansour

Students of English majoring in literature find it difficult to cope with literature in general and with poetry in particular. The difficulty becomes insurmountable when learners face a sophisticated literary text that does not, at first glance, give to them a single meaning or theme. Unfortunately, due to their lack of knowledge about literature and about recent literary theories, and due to their fossilized beliefs that any printed text should yield one single author-intended meaning, students are unable to come to terms with some modern English and American literary texts. This is the problem that perplexes many students.

In this article, I discuss the importance of engaging students in activities based on literary theory so that students can communicate their appreciation of a text in a professional environment.

Engaging Students in the Text is Not Enough

Maley (1989:11) believes that “students develop an understanding of how literature functions as a by-product of their interactive engagements with the texts.” Widdowson (1975) argues that if we mean to develop the capacity in our students for independent reading and response, we must find means of engaging them actively in the exploration and interpretation of texts, without merely telling them what to see. In fact, engaging students in activities is of great importance initially in motivating learners.

However, I have observed that without giving the students a theory, against which to interpret whatever text they are engaged in, they will not be able to produce a valuable discourse on that text regardless of the activity.

Some professors offer their own personal interpretations of the text, thereby giving the students the illusion that the poem has but one author or professor-intended meaning. So, for a large number of students, “literature continues to entail a concentration of cribs and lecture notes, on books seen through the spectacle of other books” (Lewis 1961:28). No doubt many students prefer this because it does not require them to think, and it puts the responsibility of interpreting the text on the professor.

On the other hand, Rodger (1969:89) believes that the task of English teachers is “not to hand over predigested meanings, but to teach students to read and interpret for themselves, to be reasonably skilled and sensitive readers, able to feel and judge, with fidelity to the textual facts, in response to any work of literature they may choose to read.” In order to achieve this goal, students and teachers alike should be aware of at least a few new approaches other than the traditional ones in interpreting texts.

Literary Approaches

Thanks to the array of interpretative theories ranging from classical Plato’s and Aristotle’s to postmodern Derrida’s and Barth’s, literature teachers can select whichever theories are suitable

or functional with their students. Classroom practice has shown me that the overwhelming majority of students cannot write or speak about literary texts without having an interpretive theory as a reference in which to place the literary text. Without it, the best that students can do with a text is rephrase or paraphrase its content, provided they understand it lexically.

Gilroy-Scot rightly states that “students do not know how to approach literature, and teachers do not know how to present it” (Brumfit 1983:2). However, if teachers could simplify literary theories and present them to students, the latter would be able to approach texts critically.

Abstract Painting Activity

In teaching poetry, like Wallace Stevens’, “The Emperor of Ice-Cream,” a teacher can begin by introducing students beforehand to the main tenets of one or more theories. Teachers need to stress the importance of being subjective during the process of interpretation if they are introducing students to any of the receptive theories. Teachers should stress being objective if they are introducing formalist or structuralist theories before engaging the students in the activity. Then, they can ask students to tell them what they, the students, think about abstract paintings. Teachers will probably find that most students think that abstract paintings are funny, crazy, nonsensical, strange, bizarre, odd, or a combination of lines and colors. This can be exploited in the teaching of poetry at both the receptive or structuralist levels.

Next, teachers should ask a volunteer to sketch an abstract painting on the board in white or color chalk. Once this is done, they can ask each student to write a couple of lines to explain the sketch. Then volunteers can read aloud their sentences. Also, let the student who sketched the figure talk about it.

Both teachers and students will be surprised at the richness of these interpretations. The students are now interpreters and critics, and the student-artist will notice that the interpretations may vary at certain points.

Now students can reread a poem that they previously found to be obscure or rigid. They can read it using the same techniques that they did for the sketches. Students should think of the words as lines, shapes, symbols, and colors. Teachers can suggest that students forget that this poem was composed by an artist who might or might not have had a personal or general vision of some sort at the moment of composition. Instead students should think of the poem as a text that is open to all sorts of impressions and interpretations, and they should allow the process of learning and deciphering to take over.

Literature students in my classes were given a poem at the beginning of the year without having any interpretative theory in mind. A few of them managed a brief lexical paraphrasing, but the rest protested that the poem was incomprehensible and demanded that I explain it to them. Instead of giving them an interpretation, I used the abstract painting activity, but only after I had introduced them to some literary theories. As a result, the students gradually began to gain confidence in their interpretations.

As students gained knowledge of how these literary theories operate on a text such as English decorum, Aristotle’s forms, and Plato’s initiative, they began to isolate words or chunks of the

text, label them, and relate them either to other chunks in the text or to their own visions and experiences of the world.

In poems, the verbs can be compared to the bold colors and lines in a painting and can carry tones of domination or submission. Other words carry gender references and can trigger many colorful interpretations. In general, words inspire endless association of terms, which when put together can create many interesting interpretations.

Conclusion

Students usually prefer ready-made interpretations of any literary text, but once they are equipped with a few interpreting models or methods and are reasonably stimulated by being engaged in related activities, they can excel and will be surprised. Equipping students with such interpretative skills is not an easy task. Students and teachers with only a nodding acquaintance of any literary theory are unlikely to produce something substantial. Therefore, perseverance and dedication by teachers and students are necessary in learning how to interpret and write critically about poems.

References

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